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The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

TED STRONG'S FORE-THOUGHT

or

The King of the Mesa

BY

NED TAYLOR

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TED STRONG'S FORETHOUGHT;

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The King of the Mesa.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

COWBOY FUN.

"Stiddy thar, Carl; look out or yer hoss'll git away from ye."

"Lean over and whisper gently in its ear. Don't use force with it."

"Speak gently to it, Carl, speak gently."

"Appeal to the better side of its nature."

Carl Schwartz was mounted on a bad-tempered pinto pony, and the other young rough riders, perched in comfortable attitudes about the porch of the Las Animas Ranch house, were watching his efforts to manage the animal.

From time to time a burst of laughter came from the merry group, and the voices of girls mingled pleasantly with the rougher voices of the men, for Louise Rossiter and Daisy Miller were seated in wicker-work armchairs on the porch, behind the boys.

Carl was having the time of his life on the pinto pony. To look at Carl you would not think him able to ride anything faster than an undertaker's horse which had become too lazy for its job. Carl was very short and very stout. His arms were short and fat and his legs were short and fatter still; his face wore a sleepy, contented expression and he sat his charger with the airy grace of an elephant. But, in spite of appearances, Carl, by dint of long and persistent try-

ing, had acquired a faculty of sticking on the horse's back, although he did not stay close to the saddle, by any means. He was in reality a much better rider than a good many people who look very graceful on their horses, and although he would never have the sure, firm seat or confidence of Kit Summers, Bud Morgan or Ted Strong, he was fit to ride the ordinary ranch horse, and that is saying a good deal, as most boys who have lived on a Western cattle ranch will admit.

At present, however, Carl had about all that he could handle.

"Py chimineddy!" he exclaimed, as the pony reared up on its hind legs, "vas iss der matter mit you? Do you want to walk on your tail like a man? Get down, or I'll preak your face!"

"Oh, Carl!" came in a chorus of voices from the boys on the porch. "You wouldn't do anything like that, would you? You wouldn't strike the horse? Such brutality!"

"I'll sdrike him all right, all right, oof he don'd pehave mit mineselluf," puffed Carl.

"Lead him up to the fence and nail him to it," said Ben Tremont, "then get a stepladder and climb gently on his back. Tie yourself there with a reata and you can't fall off."

"That horse needs rubber shoes," said Beanpole; "that's what's the matter with it. It will catch cold walking about on that damp grass, and it knows it. The animals have wonderful instinct that way. That's why it's lifting its forefeet so high. It's trying to keep them dry."

"It's wonderful the instinct that animals have," said Bob Martin; "it's simply amazing. As Shakespeare says, 'Dumb brutes have brains to reason with, and oft we find they know more than the Dutchmen who try to ride them.'"

"Whoopee!" yelled Bud Morgan. "Look out thar, Carl, it's a-tryin' ter get its legs coiled around yer neck. It's tryin' ter get a strangle holt on ye. Ef ye don't look out it'll pull ye over its head an' hold ye in its forefeet while it bites ye. Look out!"

"Put some salt on its tail," said Kit, "then it will do whatever you want it to."

"How can I put salt on its tail?" said Carl, as the words were jolted out of him by the bucking of the pony. "I can't see der tail unt I am getting pusy all der time keeping in der saddle, alretty."

Suddenly the horse stopped the hard gallop in which it had been going around in a big ring and stood stockstill.

Carl fell forward in the saddle and embraced the animal fervently around the neck with both arms.

The animal reared up with its hind quarters and kicked violently into space. Carl, still holding to its head, turned a complete somersault and landed on his feet, facing it.

A wild cheer broke from the boys on the porch.

"Good boy, Carl!"

"That's ther neatest done stunt I ever seed."

"How did you do it?"

"You ought to be in a circus."

"Do it again, Carl; I love to see you do that."

These were the cries that fell upon the ears of the German youth. He stepped away from the horse, still holding it by the bridal rein.

"I haf had enough oof der rough riting," he said. "I don'd want no more oof der horse. Gif me one dot iss fatterer unt more easier going. Dot iss what I want."

Bud Morgan swung himself to the back of the horse, and for a moment there was an exhibition of bucking and jumping that made the girls sit up and scream. It was a new horse, recently purchased for the *remuda*, and only half broken. Bud had fastened his spurs in the girths, however, and the horse could not shake him

off. After a little run out on the prairie and back, the pinto became quiet and submissive.

Then Bud came back at a full gallop and brought the horse to a standstill in front of the girls.

They both clapped their hands in applause.

"Good boy!" said Daisy. "You have it broken now."

"Dot vos because I haf ritten him der first," said Carl, who had sunk into a chair beside the girls. "I haf proken his spirit before Pud rote him."

"That's right, Carl," said Ben Tremont; "if it wasn't for you we wouldn't be able to ride any of the horses about here. You are the champion rough rider and most graceful horseman in this outfit."

"Let's try some cowboy stunts," said Kit Summers, "just to show the girls what we can do by this time."

"That's a good idea," said Beanpole. "I feel a chill coming over me and I need a little exercise."

"I'm game," said Bud. "I'll show ye how ter handle a rawhide quirt. Reach me yer quirt, Kit, an' I'll show ye a stunt."

Kit handed over a plaited rawhide about ten feet long. It was stiff and heavy at the handle, but pliable at the end, where it tapered down to a wire-tipped point.

Bud slipped the thing about his wrist and then turned to the crowd on the porch.

"Anybody here got a silver dollar?" he asked.

Mr. Rossiter, the uncle of Louise, produced the coin.

"Don't you give it to him," said Ben Tremont; "you'll never see it again if you do."

In spite of this warning, old Rossiter tossed over the coin, which Bud caught deftly in his left hand. He threw it on the ground about fifteen feet away from the porch.

"I'll show you a fancy way of pickin' up money whenever you happen ter find it scattered about the perairie," said Bud. "It may come in handy sometime."

He urged his horse to a gallop and sent it sweeping around in a big circle. As he dashed past the coin, about six feet away from it, he suddenly leaned forward and shot out his right hand.

With a snap that sounded like the crack of a rifle, the rawhide quirt went hissing through the air. Like a flying fish leaping from the waves, the silver dollar went twinkling up into the air.

"Tails!" yelled Bud, as he grabbed for it. He caught it, although he nearly slipped clean over the side of the horse in doing so. Then he sat back in the saddle, pulled his horse up and opened his hand.

The coin lay in his palm, with the obverse side up.

"Tails; I win," said Bud, calmly, putting it into his pocket.

There was a roar of laughter from the boys, and Mr. Rossiter smiled.

"That's all right," he said; "it was worth a dollar to see that trick."

Ted rose to his feet with a smile.

"I don't know," he said; "I've seen more than that for a dollar. Throw the coin down again, Bud, and let me try my hand at it."

"Watch Ted," said Daisy Miller, laying her hand on Louise's arm. "I'll bet he can do it just as well as Bud."

Ted threw the coin down in the spot where Bud had dropped it, and mounted the horse which Bud had just left. He took the quirt in his right hand and started off his horse.

"Now," he said, "this coin goes to whoever catches it. I won't try for it myself."

"Come on, boys, here's a chance for everybody," yelled Bud. "This is as good as three-card monte."

The boys were nothing loath. They scattered themselves along the porch and over the grass like the fielders in a baseball game.

Ted, mounted on the pinto, went galloping by and

struck at the coin as Bud had done. Again it went flying through the air.

Everybody grabbed for it.

It whirled over Bud's head, although he leaped three feet in the air in an effort to reach it.

Ben Tremont made a wild reach for it, but missed it by an ace.

Beanpole and Carl Schwartz each scrambled for it and collided heavily. Beanpole fell backward and knocked over Bob Martin, who was running up behind him.

Louise and Daisy screamed and ducked their heads as they saw the twinkling piece of silver coming straight for them, as they imagined.

It cleared their heads and dropped jingling on the porch at the feet of Rossiter.

He stooped down and picked it up before the others had realized what had happened.

Bud looked at Ted with an injured expression on his face.

"Jumpin' sandhills, pard!" he exclaimed, "ye done me thet time!"

"You came near doing Mr. Rossiter," laughed Ted.

"Great rockies!" said Bud, "yer as foxy at thet as ye air at everything else."

CHAPTER II.

TED'S DECISION.

While Ted was dismounting from the horse and turning it over to Carl Schwartz again, one of the Mexicans attached to the Las Animas Ranch rode up to the porch and waited respectfully behind Ted. It was evident that he wished to speak to the young rough rider.

This Mexican was a good-looking fellow, well-built and taller than the majority of the vaqueros, who, as a rule, are rather short and undersized. His name was Luigi Arispe, and on one occasion before he had acted as a guide for Ted Strong.

"Hello!" said Ted, turning around and looking at him, "what's the news?"

Luigi bowed low before he made answer.

"I have just ridden in from the Golden Mesa," he said. "Following your orders, we have driven one of the herds there and left a strong guard of vaqueros in charge of them. This morning there arrived a number of men from the Las Palomas Ranch, in the employ of the Señora Orsimo. They tried to drive us from the mesa, saying that the señora owned it and forbade trespassers there. We outnumbered them and, following your orders, we remained there and took care of the herd, refusing to leave the mesa. They left at length, going through the pass in the Golden Hills to the new ranch house at Las Palomas, where the señora now lives. They said that they would return on the morrow with a sufficient force to drive us from the mesa and to capture as many of our cattle as they saw fit."

All the other boys had crowded around to listen to this recital.

For some weeks a war had been going on between Ted Strong and this lady, the Señora Orsimo, who laid claim to a strip of valuable grazing land known as the Golden Mesa. Ted, before he had made any move in the matter, had ascertained decisively that the land really belonged to the Las Animas Ranch, and that he was entitled to it. The Señora Orsimo had shown a disposition to set aside all law and to hold the mesa by force, and Ted had decided in this instance to meet force with force, and had sent a herd with a strong body of vaqueros in charge to occupy the land in question.

Mr. George Miller, part owner of the Las Animas Ranch, showed some doubt when he heard Arispe's story.

"I'm afraid we are in to lose those cattle, Ted," he said. "I knew it was an imprudent thing to send them there, but you insisted on having it that way."

"It's never imprudent to stand up for your rights," said Ted. "We are entitled to that land, and I don't allow anyone to take my rights away from me without some fight on my part. I expected some demonstration of this sort, and I may say that I have prepared for it. I'll ask a couple of the boys to ride over with me to the pass through the Golden Hills this afternoon. It's a ride of ten miles or so. You, Luigi, may ride back to the Golden Mesa. If you meet there any further messengers from the Señora Orsimo, tell them that you have gone back to the Las Animas Ranch and heard my decision. Tell them that I am determined to hold on to that land and graze as many cows there as I feel like, and that the best course for them to pursue is to submit to the inevitable. Do you understand?"

"Si, señor," said Luigi."

"Then hustle back as fast as your horse will carry you. It's a long ride, twenty miles or more, and I want you to be in charge there when the next deputation from the señora shows up."

Luigi remained long enough to take the saddle from his horse and to throw it upon the back of a fresh one. Then he mounted once more and spurred off at a canter.

Ted's face showed that he had come to some serious decision. Mr. Miller looked at him inquiringly.

"This seems a rash sort of thing," he said. "The followers of the señora will surely outnumber the men you have in charge of that herd up there. We are sure to lose a number of valuable cattle, for that woman will stop at nothing. She has some crazy idea that she's entitled to that land, and, for all the value of it, I think that I would prefer to let it go rather than have the herd harried by her vaqueros."

"If you will get on the back of a horse, Mr. Miller," said Ted, "and ride with me as far as a certain pass through the mountains, about ten miles away, I think that I'll be able to set your mind at rest. I've been doing some scouting around the country recently, and I have collected a good deal of information from the Mexicans about here. The Las Palomas rancheria has been moved since the fire that burned out the old ranch house some weeks ago, and the señora has a new place of abode entirely. I think that I'll be able to show you that the cattle are safe enough if you and a couple of the boys ride down the mesa a bit this afternoon. We can make it and get back before dark, if we take good horses."

"All right," said Mr. Miller, "I'm ready at any time."

"Count me in right away," said Kit Summers.

"Me too," said Bob Martin.

"Unt me," said Carl.

"I'm inter thet game, too," said Bud.

"I reckon that Thaddeus and myself will have to stay at home and entertain the girls," said Ben Tremont.

"I must stay at home here," said Beanpole; "those pains in my side, that were troubling me a while ago, are coming on again, and I have to take a dose of medicine for them very frequently. I should be sure to forget all about it if I went out riding with you fellows."

"Well, don't take too much of the medicine," said Ted, "it might do you more harm than the disease. As for those of you who are coming, my advice to you is to get together and saddle up just as fast as you can."

There was a general rush for the corral where the remount horses were put out to graze. Ted caught a little bay, which he had been riding a good deal since he had come down to Texas, and Carl, with a great deal of trouble, managed to catch his pinto pony once more. It was pretty well broken now, thanks to the course which Bud had put it through that day,

and allowed the German youth to mount it without kicking up any unusual fuss.

Kit Summers had a black pony ready saddled in a few minutes, and Bud mounted a gray cow pony that he claimed was the best all-round cattle horse on the ranch.

Mr. Miller had imported a valuable Eastern horse, well trained for the saddle, and he had one of the vaqueros saddle it up for his use.

After a hasty lunch the outfit set out across the mesa for a ten-mile ride.

"This is like old times, Ted," said Kit; "do you remember how we would all start off together up in Dakota when we were going for a drive or something like that?"

"Yah," said Carl, "I remember minselluf when I wass caught by der Indians. I was nearly killed unt Kit came after me."

"I remember that time very well," said Ted, "but just cast your eyes along in front of us, Bud. Isn't that a party of horsemen coming up?"

There was a cloud of dust faintly visible at a considerable distance away across the level plain. Bud shaded his eyes with his hand and looked at it.

"What do you make it?" asked Ted. "Cows or horses, or both?"

"Cain't see 'em very good yet," said Bud; "ther sun's in my eyes, an' there's a lot o' dust a-blowin' up down thar."

"It looks to me like a party of horsemen," said Kit.

"Maype id iss der vaqueros from der Golden Mesa," said Carl.

"Maybe it's an approaching tornado," said Bob Martin.

"Tornado nothin'," said Bud Morgan; "if that was a tornado ye wouldn't see nothin' else but big funnel shaped clouds o' dust a-rollin' through the air, an' ther sky as black as pitch."

"Vass iss der tornado?" asked Carl. "Id iss a thing of which nefer haf I heard minselluf."

"A tornado," explained Bob Martin, "is a kind of wild beast."

"Like a bear?" asked Carl.

"Something," said Bob, "only bigger. It just ramps along through the prairies in Kansas, devouring everything in sight. It has claws and teeth like a bear, and yet it's something like a lion. It's a horrible animal to fight in single combat, I can tell you. You have to be mighty careful when you are fighting a tornado. Way back in seventy-six, when I was a kid——"

"What's that?" asked Bud Morgan. "How old air ye now, Bob?"

"How old?" said Bob. "I can't quite remember. As Shakespeare says, you know, there are seven ages of man, 'First the infant squealing in its mother's arms——' "

"That's your age, I guess," said Kit Summers.

"How can I finish my quotation if you keep interrupting me?" said Bob; " 'First the infant——' "

"Cut it out, cut it out," said Bud; "those are horsemen all right, down in front of us. I kin make 'em out now a little better."

"Three of them, I should say," said Ted.

"That's what I make it," said Bud; "they look like Mexicans, two of them do, at any rate."

"Perhaps they are some people from the Señora Orsimo coming up to Las Animas to see us about that matter of the Golden Mesa," said Mr. Miller, who had been riding along in silence hitherto.

"We'll soon find out," said Kit Summers, "and, if they are, I guess we'll send them back about as fast as they came."

Nearer and nearer drew the three horsemen. At length, when they were twenty yards away from the young rough riders, they pulled up and came to a standstill. Two of them were Mexicans, as could easily be

seen by their swarthy appearance and the cut of the clothes they wore.

The other one was an American. He was a bronzed fellow with flowing mustachios, a thin, hard face, and closely cropped hair. He was dressed in cowboy costume, and it was evident at a glance that he was a man who had spent most of his time ranching.

The young rough riders had checked also, and for a moment the two parties sat facing each other. Then the bronzed fellow, with the long mustache, came forward at a walk.

"Is Ted Strong or Mr. George Miller in this party of gents?" he asked.

"This is Mr. Miller," said Ted, pointing to his friend, "and I am Ted Strong. Who are you?"

"My name is Jim Speed," said the other. "I've just come up from the Las Palomas Ranch. I have a message to deliver to you."

"Go ahead and deliver it."

"It's this," said Speed; "if you don't drive that herd of yours back off the Golden Mesa and keep your cows off it in the future they'll all be stampeded to-morrow morning, and you'll never see one of them again. Señora Orsimo don't want no Yankee mavericks a-straying on her land!"

CHAPTER III.

A WESTERN FEUD.

Ted, from looking over the general appearance of Jim Speed, concluded that the fellow was a sort of overseer or general foreman at the Las Palomas Ranch. Speed evidently was duly impressed with the importance of his position, for he delivered the defiant message from the Señora Orsimo in a somewhat contemptuous and haughty manner.

Ted smiled a little as he listened to it.

"You can take a message back to your mistress," he said, "in return for the one she has just sent me. The message is this: The Golden Mesa belongs to the Las Animas Ranch, and we intend to hold it. We have a herd of cattle there, and we shall keep them there. Let the señora interfere if she feels so disposed. It won't make any difference. Just ride back and tell her that Mr. George Miller and the young rough riders, the owners of the Las Animas Ranch property and of the Golden Mesa, refuse to be scared away by threats. I think I have spoken plainly enough for you to understand me."

Jim Speed stared at the young rough rider and pulled at the long ends of his mustache. Then he leaned forward from his saddle and shot out a stream of amber tobacco juice from between his lips.

"So that's yer message," he said. "You fellers have a blooming nerve, but I might as well jest tell ye now that yer jest runnin' yer head inter a rope. Any cattle yer send up ter the Golden Mesa is the property of them that owns the mesa. You'll never see it again."

"I disagree with you there," said Ted Strong, quietly.

Speed laughed.

"Disagree all you feel like," he said; "keep on disagreeing. You'll get fat on it. You fellers make me tired. You come down here thinking you can bluff people that has been in the country fer years. Yer don't know nothing about running a ranch, but you think you do. You'll learn in time, I guess, but it's going to cost you a whole lot of money to learn."

Bud Morgan had been staring at Speed in silence for some time. Now he spoke.

"I'd have to be pretty gol durned ignorant before I would come to you, Jim Speed, to learn anything about ranching," he said. "Jumpin' sandhills! What do you know about ranchin'? What was you ever good fer but cattle rustlin', anyway? I know ye, I've known ye years ago."

Speed opened his eyes and looked at the speaker.

"Bud Morgan!" he exclaimed, in astonishment. "Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me," said Bud. "Don't you remember me? Don't you remember that time up at Abilene when I sat in a game of poker opposite ye an' when you an' a couple of other four-flushers like ye tried ter give me the double cross? Hey? Don't ye remember that? An' so now yer the *segundo* on a cattle ranch, air ye? It must be a healthy ranch when yer a-runnin' it. Jumpin' sandhills! I remember ye from away back, Jim."

Ted had been watching the face of Jim Speed while Bud was speaking, and it was a study. At first it had shown nothing but surprise. Then when Bud Morgan had gone on, Speed's eyes began to narrow and his mouth to set in a hard line underneath his long, blond mustache. Ted had watched him with an eagle eye. He had seen his hand twitch and tremble and move stealthily over toward his revolver, which hung in a holster at his belt.

Now he leaned forward suddenly and grasped the fellow by the wrist. He had moved just in time, for Speed's hand had been on the verge of grasping the butt of the Colts at his belt.

"Let go of me!" shouted Speed, twisting his hand this way and that. "Let go of me, ye gol-durned tenderfoot! I'm going ter pump some lead inter you mighty quick!"

It was evident that Speed and Bud had some old feud between them, and it was evident also that Speed regarded the young rough riders as nothing more than a pack of boys beneath his notice.

He wrestled with Ted for a moment, but could not shake his wrist free from the grasp of the young rough rider.

"Take his gun, Kit," said Ted, sharply.

A moment later Speed's revolver had been drawn from his belt, and Kit Summers was leisurely ejecting the cartridges from it.

Ted let go his grip on the wrist of the ranchman and sat back in the saddle. In the meantime, Bud had drawn his revolver. Bud's face had changed completely from the expression it usually bore.

There was an old quarrel between him and Speed. Insults had passed between them which both considered could be wiped out by blood alone.

Bud's blue eyes were gleaming savagely, his yellow hair was flying in the wind, his lips were drawn back showing the white line of his teeth between them, and his big revolver was thrown forward in his hand.

He and Speed were on the verge of one of those duels which were once so common among cowboys, and which generally meant the wounding of one or both parties.

"Bud!" said Ted, and his voice was as sharp and decisive as the crack of a whip.

Bud looked toward him.

"Hand me that gun," said Ted.

Bud hesitated.

"Hand me that gun!" said Ted, in tones a trifle louder than before.

Bud handed over the weapon and Ted received it, but all the time his eyes were fixed in a steady glare on the face of Jim Speed, who was confronting him.

None of the boys had ever seen a pair of thorough Westerners genuinely aroused before. Bud Morgan, the cowboy, had always seemed to them a merry, careless, light-hearted fellow. The change that had come over his face at the sight of his ancient enemy, met thus unexpectedly, was as surprising as it was terrifying.

"Now, gentlemen," said Ted, "I have no doubt that there is good cause for a quarrel between you I don't know what the cause is, and I won't try to find out or to decide which is in the right or which is in the

wrong. But I'll say just this. We are not going to have any gun play or fighting here. The young rough riders are here on business, not to gratify private revenge, and every member of the organization will have to remember that. As for any outsider who attempts to draw a weapon on us, we shall treat him as we would treat any outlaw, take him prisoner and turn him over to the proper authorities."

Both cowboys were still glaring at each other steadily, seeming to be forgetful of everything else around them.

They resembled, more than anything else, a pair of rival animals, filled with an implacable and undying hatred, met to fight to the death.

Both their weapons had been taken away, however, by the quick action of Ted Strong, and he held command of the situation.

"Bud," he said, sternly, "I have your gun. I have this man's gun, also. I'll return your weapon to you on one condition only."

Bud glanced toward Ted Strong and caught his steady brown eyes. His own eyes seemed to waver a little, for there was something in the eyes of the captain of the young rough riders which commanded respect from anyone who looked into them.

"What is it, boss?" he asked, in a husky voice.

"It's this," said Ted, "I want you to set aside your feud with this man, for the present, at least. There's nothing to be gained by your fighting him now on an old quarrel. I won't give you your gun till you promise this."

Bud said nothing, but his eyes dropped and he looked no longer at the face of Ted Strong but at the ground. His face was drawn and tense, and it was evident that he was struggling with some great passion.

The boys who looked at Bud Morgan now thought that they were looking at another man from the one whom they were accustomed to see. Generally he was smiling and easy in his demeanor, without a thought, apparently, beyond the present, but now they saw him aroused, and they could see that underneath Bud's deceptive exterior there was a depth of feeling and passion that they had never dreamed of. It is the same with most cattleman. To the casual observer, they are careless and care free, but underneath there is generally something that terrifies the onlooker when it comes to the surface and is visible.

Ted turned to Jim Speed.

"I have your weapon," he said, "and you also see that your party is outnumbered. At a word from me, the whole three of you would be riddled with bullets. Revolvers!"

Ted called out the last word in a sharp tone. At its sound everyone of the rough riders reached for his weapon, and every weapon was directed unerringly toward Speed and his two Mexican followers, who sat mutely upon their horses behind him.

Speed looked from one side to the other and saw nothing but the steady eyes of the determined boys who were facing him, and the cold, merciless muzzles of their weapons.

His face relaxed a little from the set expression it wore, and he grinned carelessly.

"Looks ter me like as if ye had the drop on me," he said, with a grin; "you-alls have guns, and I haven't any, so what can I do?"

"You can clear right out of here and quit this gun-fanning bluff," said Ted; "we aren't going to have any wild West dueling here at present."

Speed shrugged his shoulders.

"Looks like as if you-alls had the say," he said, "but yer friend, Bud Morgan? Do ye intend ter let him take pot shots at me as I ride off?"

"No, I don't," said Ted; "if you are protected, will you go off peaceably and deliver the message I gave you?"

"Only thing I can do," said Speed, ridding his mouth of another accumulation of tobacco juice.

Ted turned toward Bud Morgan.

"Have I your promise, Bud, that you will let this quarrel drop for the present?"

"That man killed a brother of mine back at Abilene," said Bud; "he was my kid brother, about sixteen, an' the nicest, squarest boy you ever seed. I—swore—then—when we put—him away——"

Bud stopped speaking suddenly and choked. He brushed the back of his hand across his eyes. Twice he tried to speak, but twice he broke down.

"Ted," he said, "please don't ask me ter do that. Give me my gun an' let me take my chance with him. Then lock me up in jail. I don't care if I'm strung up, but I'll pay that feller first. Poor Tom—my brother, you know—he was the only thing I had in the world—I cain't help this, pard."

Once more Bud drew the back of his hand across his eyes. In the meantime, Speed sat looking at him, unmoved, chewing his tobacco. The only evidence of nervousness he showed was that he spat very frequently.

Ted looked at his friend with sad, kindly eyes.

"I'm sorry, Bud, old chap," he said, laying his hand on the shoulder of the cowboy; "I'm sorry."

"I know yer is, pard," said Bud, in a husky voice. "I knew ye fer a white man through an' through from the first time I ever sot eyes on ye back thar at Crook City when ye first came West. There isn't a thing but this I wouldn't do fer ye, pard. If ye was to ask me ter give ye my last cent, or my little pinto pony, that I wouldn't sell fer no money, do ye think I would hesitate? Not a minute, Ted. But this is too much. Fer years I've been hopin' an' prayin' every night that I might set eyes on this feller. I ain't never said a word to none of you fellers about it. I cain't bear ter talk about it, as ye see. Poor Tom! He's lyin' cold an' dead back at the ole churchyard up ter Abilene. An' I've swore over an' over thet I would shoot this feller whenever I seed him. He's afraid of me now." Bud's voice suddenly became stronger, the expression of sorrow left his face, and one of fierceness, implacable and determined, took its place. "He's afraid of me now, ther skunk, fer all he sits an' grins thar. I'll kill him. I don't need no revolver ter do it, neither. I'll do it with my bare hands."

Bud broke off suddenly and would have thrown himself upon Speed had not Ted caught him and held him. For a moment there was a struggle. Speed looked at the pair, trying to maintain his smiling composure, but his face had gone pale underneath his tan, and his lips were twitching nervously.

"Be quiet, now, Bud," said Ted. "Help me hold him, Kit."

"I shot him in fair fight," said Speed, between pale lips, but Ted paid no attention to him.

A moment later Bud quieted down and sat back in his saddle. The terrible storm of passion that had swept over him seemed to have left him comparatively composed.

"I advise you to wheel your horse about and get away from here as quickly as ever you can," said Ted, turning to Jim Speed. "You can see for yourself that this man has it in for you, and that you are not safe when he is around."

Jim Speed, with all his faults, was not a man to run away in the face of danger. He did not want to appear at a disadvantage before the two Mexican vaqueros who were behind him, watching all that went forward with open-eyed wonderment.

"I'm not afraid of him," said he, sullenly, although his face was still the color of ashes in spite of its heavy coating of tan; "I don't back down from no man."

"Get back with your message," said Ted, sternly, "or I'll put you under arrest now."

Jim Speed slowly turned his horse.

"So long for the present," he said, "but remember I don't back down from no man."

He rode off at a trot, followed by the vaqueros.

Bud Morgan said never a word, but sat stock still staring after him with a terrible, set face.

"I'm sorry, Bud, old boy," said Ted; "if I give back your revolver you'll promise to keep quiet about this for the present, won't you? I promise you that I'll get a warrant for that man's arrest and serve it myself, if I have to. He won't escape if you can prove your case against him. But don't try to take vengeance into your own hands at present. Think of your brother, if you will. Would he want you to have the guilt of murder on your soul? Do you think he would like you to act that way?"

"I dunno, Ted," said Bud, in a choking voice, after a long silence, "maybe you air right. It's a hard thing your askin' me ter do, but what you says about Tom not likin' it may be right arter all."

"Of course, it's right," said Ted. "You never told me anything about him. But he was young, and you know yourself whether or not he would have wanted you to act this way."

Bud remained silent a long time.

"God knows he was a good boy," he said, finally. "He was the best, whitest feller thet ever lived. It's five years sence I put him away. When he was livin' I was proud o' him, an' I hed him sent ter school so's he'd be better eddicated nor a pore cow puncher like me. An' he was a white boy through an' through. When he come back from ther East, where he had been studyin', he tried ter keep me straight. He was in a gamblin' joint lookin' fer this feller who had skinned me in a card game. They both pulled guns, for, bless you, Tom, though he was only a boy, weren't afraid o' anything livin'. An' this feller got ther drop on him an' kilt him. Sence then, till I met you fellers, I didn't keer much what becomed o' me. But when I met you boys ye seemed sorter like him somehow. Ye was nice, clean, honest fellers, with eyes that could look ye in the face, like he had. Thet's what made me like yer at the first, Ted. An' I suppose yore right. I ain't nothin' but a pore, ignorant cowboy. I don't know better. I guess as how pore Tom, ef he was alive now, would have talked ter me ther way you hes done, Ted, many a time—the way ye done jest now. I guess as how he would hev said not ter draw my gun."

"Then you promise for his sake?" said Ted, softly.

"For his sake," said Bud.

Ted handed the revolver back to Bud.

"I'm not afraid to trust you with it," he said; "you've promised me, and I've promised you to run down that fellow yet."

"Thanks," was all that Bud Morgan said.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE NARROW PASS.

It was some hours later before the young rough riders arrived at the pass through the Golden Mesa for which they had set out. The party had ridden in silence for the most part of the way, for Bud Morgan's evident grief was too sacred a thing for anyone to break in upon. Bud, however, soon regained control of himself.

Men bred in the West may have their faults. They are often violent and reckless, careless of human life, their own lives as well as the lives of others, but there are some good qualities that their hard life brings out. One of these is a stern, unbending stoicism that can accept good and evil with like composure. The true Westerner laughs at death as he would laugh at the dangers of a steer-roping contest, and, although he may suffer bitterly, he has the Indian gift of keeping his sufferings and his grief to himself. The boys had

known Bud Morgan, the cowboy, for a long time now. They had seen him in every possible circumstance, slept with him, eaten with him, suffered hardships and fatigue with him, talked with him, and rejoiced with him, and now they knew him about as well as one man may know another. But never by word or sign had Bud shown any of them the secret grief that he had been nursing in his heart, or the hope for vengeance that had been in his mind through all those days. They had considered him as a man without a thought beyond the immediate present, and without a care in the world. He had talked little of his past history, and, what little he had said, had indicated nothing as to his true feelings. The outward manifestations of his emotion had only been drawn from him by the sudden and unexpected appearance of the man whom he connected with the greatest sorrow in his life, and whom he hated more than any other living creature.

There was not a boy there who did not respect Bud more and love him more because of what they had seen that day. Bud spoke nothing more of his meeting with Jim Speed, and the others had too much kindness and too much tact to refer to it again. Even Carl, who talked continuously, and who could be depended on usually to make a blunder when there was any possible opening for it, managed to keep from questioning Bud about his dead brother, and so Bud was permitted to ride along in silence. He saw Ted and Kit glance at him once or twice, and he read in those glances more sympathy and kindness than could be spoken in words, and he was thankful for it.

By the time they reached the narrow pass, for which they had set out, Bud was himself again.

"Here we are," said Mr. Miller, reining up his horse. "Now, Mr. Ted Strong, you have brought us out here. What is it that you have to show us?"

"If you listen to me and use your eyes while you listen you will soon see," said Ted. "You can see at a glance that there are three passes leading through this range of hills, and the hills themselves are so steep and difficult that it is impossible to lead horses or cattle through them except by the passes."

"I can see that all right," said Mr. Miller. "This place looks like an Alpine valley."

"That pass on the right," said Ted, "leads into the Golden Mesa. It's our property, and we want to hold it. That pass on the left leads into the lands of the Señora Orsimo, and up to the place where she had her ranch house. She wants this mesa, too."

"I understand that pretty well by this time," said Miller.

"And that pass through which we have just come leads back to our ranch land and is our means of communication with the Golden Mesa, as the pass on the left is the only means by which the señora can get her horses or her men to it."

"Yes, that's so, but what has that to do with us? We are not interested in the manner in which this lady gets to the land she claims. Our interest would rather lie in keeping her out of it."

"Exactly," said Ted; "that's why I brought you here. To keep her out of it is just what we want, and to keep her out of it we must close up the way through which she comes in."

"That's all right," said Kit Summers, "but do you intend to post a guard and keep it here all the time?"

"I intend to put a guard here," said Ted, with a smile, "and I think that when I put it here it will stay here."

"That would be a pretty expensive thing," said Mr. Miller; "paying the salary of a gang of trusted men to guard this place. The señora might take them by surprise some night, or a whole lot of things might happen. I must say, Ted, that I don't think this plan of yours is as good as those you usually suggest."

"Der guards might fall asleep," said Carl.

"Yes," said Bob Martin, "or they might stray away from here. As Shakespeare remarks, 'The truest guard may prove of little use when full of beer or other sorts of booze.' "

"The guard I put here won't drink," said Ted.

"Maybe not, but he'll want his salary all the same," said Mr. Miller.

"Get off your horses and I'll show you my plan," said Ted, slipping from the saddle.

The others followed suit, and a few moments later the horses were staked out and grazing on the sparse grass that grew in the shadow of the narrow pass. Ted led the way up the pass, the others following wonderingly.

"You see," explained Ted, "I've been doing a little exploring about here, and I've learned a thing or two about this spot. Just follow me. I was up here yesterday when I took a lone ride. You'll have to do a little climbing, and I advise you to be careful of your feet or you may turn an ankle in among the rocks. I have to be doubly careful myself. A fall for me now would mean rather serious consequences."

Ted led the way, and to those who followed he seemed to be walking among the rocks in an unusually slow and careful manner. The young rough riders, with Mr. Miller, walked along in Indian file; fat, puffing Carl Schwartz bringing up the rear and climbing from rock to rock with infinite labor and pains. At length they struck a path that wound up the side of the rocky wall of the pass.

"This is a coyote path," said Ted; "it's so steep that we'll have to take it on all fours."

"Mein gracious!" said Carl; "I will preak mineselluf in two der rocks among. Id iss mine fault, Ted, oof you fall unt kill mineselluf."

"As Shakespeare remarks," said Bob Martin, " 'It is a steep and rugged hill, but what boots it if there is a Dutchman or two killed in the climbing?' "

"I will boot you mit my boot," said Carl, "oof you don'd shut my mouth up."

"Well, here we are at the top," said Kit; "the view is worth the climb."

One after another the boys clambered up and stood upon the rocky summit of the pass that led from the Las Palomas Range to the Golden Mesa.

They breathed deeply of the glorious air, felt the warm sunshine streaming over them, and saw spread before them a great expanse of country.

On one side extended the Las Palomas Range, bounded in the distance by an *arroyo* and a grove of trees, behind which lay the new house that the Señora Orsimo had recently built. On the other, shimmering like molten gold in the sunlight, stretched the Golden Mesa.

"There's the land we are fighting for," said Ted, indicating it with a wave of the hand. "Don't you think that it looks worth while?"

"I should say that it did!" said Mr. Miller, enthusiastic in spite of himself at the wonderful view thus spread before him.

"The view's worth the climb, isn't it?" said Ted.

"It is, but that isn't all you brought us up here for?"

"No," said Ted; "just turn your eyes the other way." Ted pointed down into the narrow path that led through the wall of hills into the Las Palomas Range. It looked dark and gloomy now that they were up in the clear sunlight that bathed the summit of the cliff, and at its narrowest point it could not have been more than twenty or thirty feet across.

"By Jove!" said Mr. Miller, "that's a canyon all right! It looks something like Nassau Street in New York, where it runs down among tall buildings on either hand. It's just as narrow, and these cliffs are higher and pretty nearly as steep as the buildings in New York."

"Yes," said Ted, "and it's the narrowness of that

pass that is going to help us. Look down on this side and you'll see a big overhanging piece of rock."

"I see it," said Miller; "it must have been hollowed out underneath by the water. There must be two or three hundred tons in that piece of rock and earth."

"Chimineddy!" said Carl, "oof that efer fell on der feller's head underneath it vouldn't hurt him. I don'd want to stand under dot rock mineselluf alretty."

"I guess you are wise," said Ted, "that piece of rock is going to fall down there. A slight explosion will make it fall, and it will choke up the entire pass so that it can't be crossed, for there will be a regular landslide from the hill up here, and the whole place will be filled. I have a couple of sticks of blasting powder with me, and a couple of cold chisels. There's a little sledge hanging from the pommel of Bud Morgan's saddle. After this, Señora Orsimo will have to go about fifteen miles from the Las Palomas Ranch house when she wants to get to the Golden Mesa!"

CHAPTER V.

KING OF THE MESA.

There was silence for a moment after Ted had disclosed what his plan to gain the Golden Mesa for the Las Animas Ranch really consisted of.

The young rough riders broke into a ringing cheer, for the clear, pure air and sunlight had had a good effect on their spirits.

Mr. Miller joined in the cheer. He was not a Westerner and knew nothing of ranch life, but he was a good business man and had a good, clear, practical head. He saw the feasibility of Ted's plan at once, and saw how filling up the narrow pass would effectually bottle up the Golden Mesa and place it beyond the reach of the señora. He knew that she must know by this time that she was waging a losing fight against the young rough riders, and when she received this blow she would be ready to give it up. She had plenty of ranch land of her own, and it took her vaqueros all their time to look after the herds on her range. She would be unable to spare men to ride around a fifteen or twenty mile circuit to reach the Golden Mesa, and to clear the pass of the mass of rock and earth that Ted was preparing to throw into it would require months of labor.

"Come on, now, boys," said Ted; "let's get to work and finish this job up. It will give us something to talk about at dinner to-night, and we want to ride back and be at Las Animas in time for the meal. Kit and Bud, you had both better come down here with me and arrange about setting off the blast."

"I'll climb up from underneath and bring the hammer," said Bud, as he scampered off down the side of the cliff.

Ten minutes later the three boys were taking turns at swinging the sledge, driving the cold chisel into clefts in the rock and making them wider for the admission of the blasting powder. The rock was dry and rotting in parts, and this made their task a little easier, but still it was hard labor swinging the sledge. Carl Schwartz was impressed into the service, but he proved himself so clumsy at swinging the sledge and hammered himself on the fingers so frequently that he was finally voted more of a nuisance than a help, and was allowed to go down to the bottom of the pass and remain there with the horses.

"I don'd care," said he; "I will haf a nice rest mitt mineselluf. I haf hammered mit der hammer on my fingers unt it iss no fun. Py chimineddy, I am hot!"

Lying on the turf at the edge of the pass, Carl watched the other three boys at work, and frequently encouraged them in broken English. Bob Martin unslung a couple of lariats from the top of the cliff, made them fast there, and the boys made loops in them and used them for support while they were at their

work. At length Ted was satisfied that the rock was honeycombed sufficiently to send it tumbling into the pass when the blasts should be discharged. Ted himself loaded the drills with the blasting powder, connecting them with time fuses which he had brought with them, and running the fuses down the cliff to the bottom of the ravine.

"I guess we are all right now," he said at length. "The only thing that remains for us to do is to get ourselves and our horses to a safe distance and then to let off the blast."

The boys were nothing loath to do this, for all were anxious to see the explosion when it should be let off. The sun was beginning to drop down the western sky when Ted announced that everything was ready.

Then he set off the fuses, and, as they began to sputter and sparkle, he ran speedily up the ravine to the other boys, who were holding the horses steady behind a sheltering projection of rock.

They all waited in silence for several minutes.

"Py chimineddy!" began Carl, when he was interrupted by a long, rumbling detonation that seemed to shake the very ground beneath their feet.

It sounded like thunder, and the boys saw clouds of dust rolling up into the air above the summit of the rock behind which they were sheltered. The horses reared up and pawed with fear, and the boys had all they could do to keep them quiet. Then came the crashing fall of many large rocks, which had been thrown high into the air by the force of the explosion.

"It's all right now," said Ted, after a wait of a few minutes more, "I guess we can go out and see how our blast has worked."

Helter-skelter the boys rushed out from their shelter and down the pass toward the place where the great mass of rock had lately overhung it. The pass was thick with clouds of dust and great splinters of jagged rock, over which they stumbled, lay all about their feet.

"Chimineddy!" said Carl Schwartz, "I don'd know mineselluf. Id iss like some place else wot wasn't here pefore der eggsplosion."

"By all the gods!" said Bob Martin, "you have wrought a change, Ted. As Shakespeare says, 'Nature has wondrous portents——'"

"Ther pass is stopped up all right," interrupted Bud Morgan, "only ye cain't see very good yet till the plaguey dust settles a little more."

The dust did settle finally, and then the boys started forward to examine their handiwork. Ted Strong had made his calculations carefully, and, as a result of his blast, a large portion of land at the top of the cliff had fallen in and choked the passage completely. It would have been scarcely possible for a boy to have climbed the rocky obstruction on foot now.

"I've left my mark here," said Ted. "I guess it means 'No thoroughfare,' and I believe anybody who comes this way can understand."

"You have my congratulations on your good work," said Mr. Miller. "You are king of the mesa now!"

CHAPTER VI.

A WARRANT FOR JIM SPEED.

That night the boys had a big jollification at the Las Animas Ranch house. They felt, as did Mr. Miller, that in closing up the passage to the Golden Mesa, they had effectually blocked off any attempt that the Señora Orsimo might make to obtain possession of it. Besides that, they knew it would be a question of a few days only until the señora was deprived of the services of Jim Speed, her foreman. They had heard of Jim Speed, although they had never connected him with Bud Morgan in any way, and they knew that the señora, being a widow, had depended wholly on him to run the ranch for her. She would be seriously hampered when deprived of his services,

for Speed knew well how to handle the Mexicans on the ranch, keep them in order, and get plenty of work out of them.

With only Mexicans on the Las Palomas Ranch the widow would find herself in a bad way, for she, herself, being a woman, could not take active command of the running of the ranch, and she would have no one who had sufficient knowledge of the business to take charge of affairs generally.

Mexicans make very good vaqueros. They are splendid horsemen, and they know how to rope steers and how to drive them as well as any class of men who can be found anywhere. But they are lacking in initiative and sense of responsibility. They are ignorant and superstitious for the most part, lazy and indolent by nature, and have not the faintest idea of business or affairs.

It takes a strong man to handle vaqueros and keep them to their work. The señora had found such a man in Jim Speed, who, although he was a good deal of a scoundrel in many ways, was admirably fitted for his position, and knew that he had a good job and that the wisest thing for him to do would be to fulfill his duties as well as he knew how, and retain his position as virtual head of the ranch as long as possible.

Bud Morgan alone of the young rough riders took no share in the good times that were going forward at Las Animas. Bud was usually among the liveliest in the party, but on the present occasion he felt little like enjoying himself. The sight of Jim Speed had called up ancient memories to his mind, and he sat apart from the other boys, brooding over them, silent and sad featured.

There was dancing after supper, the long room of the ranch house being cleared of its tables for the purpose. Louise and Daisy danced with all of the boys in turn, and, besides the American girls, there were plenty of other partners for them. There were numbers of dark-eyed Mexican girls, the daughters of vaqueros living in the native adobe huts, or *jacals*, about the ranch house, and they enjoyed dancing as only people of a southern race can. Several of the younger vaqueros could play on the guitar and mandolin, and, although Bud Morgan's banjo was silent, there was music, and music of the best possible kind for dancing on a soft Texas night, with the breezes sighing through the trees and vines about the ranch house, and the cold moon shining down over all.

"Las Palomas," the Mexican national song, was the favorite air of this native orchestra, and the boys found that it made excellent dance music.

After the boys were tired disporting themselves, the vaqueros took a hand and the young rough riders had an opportunity of seeing genuine Mexican dancing, fandangoes and boleroes which had been brought over to the new world by the cavaliers of ancient Spain.

"Dot iss der boedry of motioness," said Carl Schwartz, as he watched them, tired out with his own efforts and mopping the perspiration from his brow with a bandanna which looked more like a small table cloth than a handkerchief.

Carl had danced with both Louise and Daisy. He had managed to put one of his feet through Daisy's gauzy skirt, and had trod so heavily on the toes of the other girl that she felt little like dancing for the rest of the evening.

"That music is great," said Bob Martin, looking languishingly into Daisy's eyes. "As Shakespeare says, 'If music be the food of love, play on, give me excess of it, but Heaven preserve me from a Dutchman who walks all over my feet when I dance and looks more like a young elephant than a man.'"

"Did Shakespeare really say that?" asked Daisy, with a laugh.

"Certainly he did," said Bob, with an injured air; "you don't think for a moment that I—*I*, the greatest

Shakespearian scholar in all the West—would be guilty of the horrible and unpardonable sin of misquotation, do you? Don't say that you dreamt of such a thing for a moment—please don't insinuate that you thought that for the briefest and most infinitesimal part of a second. It would be too shocking, too horrible; I could not stand it."

"I certainly won't," said Daisy, "not if you feel that way about it. But look at poor Bud, see how badly he feels."

She laid her hand on the arm of Louise, who sat beside her, and directed her attention toward Bud Morgan, who sat off by himself in a corner of the room with his head bowed between his hands, and his long flaxen hair hanging down, almost hiding his face.

Both the girls had heard of what had happened that day, and they both wished that they could do something for Bud to make him feel less about the death of his brother, and his meeting with the man who had killed him.

They watched Bud in silence for a moment or two, and then they saw Ted Strong walk over beside the cowboy and lay his arm upon his shoulder.

Bud looked up, and, when he saw who it was, an expression of gratitude came into his eyes.

"I've just learned," said Ted, "that Judge Blake, the circuit judge of the United States Court, is in Paco now. We can ride over there, if you wish, and swear out a warrant for Speed's arrest. Then we can look up some of the Texas Rangers and call upon them to help us serve it."

Bud Morgan sprang to his feet. The mournful expression had left his face, and his blue eyes were now blazing.

"I'm ready, Ted," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "I'll go with you now, or I'll go alone if you don't want to come. And we don't need the Texas rangers to help us, either. Give me that warrant and I'll serve it. I wouldn't care if Jim Speed had every man in the Las Palomas Ranch behind him, and I was unarmed and had nothing to help me but my bare hands."

Bud Morgan raised his hands in the air.

"Set me in front of that man," he said, "and I'll make him a prisoner. I won't need any help, there's nothing on earth to stop me. I think I can hear poor Tom's voice calling to me now."

"Steady there, Bud," said Ted, kindly.

"I'm all right, pard," said Bud. "Jumpin' sand-hills, Ted! Don't ye be afraid o' me. I'm all right. But air ye ready ter start fer Paco? Air ye ready?"

"I'm ready," said Ted, "if you are."

"I'm always ready for that job," whispered Bud.

Silently and without attracting any attention from those in the room, except the girls, the two boys slipped off, out into the calm moonlight, and into the corral where the horses were allowed to graze.

Without a word to each other, and with grave, set faces, they saddled and mounted.

Now that Bud was started out in earnest to run down the man who had killed his brother years before, a great change seemed to have come over him.

He was now neither fierce nor mournful, but his face was grave and solemn, his jaw was set hard, and there was a look of grim and settled determination in his blue eyes which were wont to twinkle so merrily.

He looked now like a man who had some great and solemn duty to perform, who had started out on some great mission and meant to let nothing stand in the way of its fulfillment.

Silently he mounted and silently he rode away with Ted across the moonlit mesa. Ted did not speak either. He could read the determination and settled purpose in Bud's face, and he knew that there was no fear of Bud's losing control of himself again.

Without a word they galloped away, setting the long

miles behind them steadily, and drawing rein at neither hill nor *arroyo*.

The moon was rising behind their backs, and the mesa was a sea of silver, broken here and there by a dark line where a dry *arroyo* ran across it, or by a grove of trees that marked the place where fresh water was to be found. The coyotes whined and yelped in the darkness, their voices sounding like the cries of lost children in the night, and the gophers darted away to their burrows almost beneath the sharp hoofs of the horses.

The mesa, at the top of which lay the Las Animas Ranch, was a great stretch of table land tilted up at one end, as it were. At the lower end lay the town of Paco, and, after a long rush through low-hanging thickets of sweet chaparral, the boys burst out into the open lower land and saw the twinkling lights of the town beneath them. A train had just left the place and Ted and Bud could hear the distant faraway scream of its whistle and the rumble of its wheels as it floated up across the clear, pure air.

They could see the long, gleaming lights in the windows of the Pullmans as the train moved away.

From where they were it looked like a giant worm with all its coils marked out and illuminated by phosphorescent lights, moving rapidly away through the darkness.

Ted called Bud's attention to it, but received no answer. Then he looked at his companion. He saw that Bud had not heard what he said.

Bud's face was stern and cold, and looked in the white moonshine like a statue carved from the purest marble. His eyes were set on the faraway town and he galloped steadily along, the reins lying unheeded on the back of his pony, oblivious to everything about him.

Ted saw that it was useless to try to interest him in anything other than the running down of Jim Speed and so he did not speak again.

Nearer and nearer drew the lights of the town, and, at length, with loose reins and foam besplashed, panting horses, they thundered down the winding street of the old Mexican cattle town.

The Santo Spirito Hotel was where Judge Blake was staying, and they pulled up in front of it.

A Mexican ran out to catch the reins of their horses as they dismounted. They stepped inside without speaking to him and inquired of the clerk if Judge Blake were in. The clerk pointed out to them a stout, clean-shaven man, dressed in black, who sat on a comfortable lounge at one end of the room, puffing at a cigar.

Ted approached him, made himself known to him, introduced Bud and told his story.

The judge listened with interest.

"Why, I know the fellow you mean," he said; "he appeared before me to-day. He was the complainant on a charge of horse stealing against a Mexican who had left the ranch on which he works and had run away with a horse. The fellow got a year in jail, too. So this man that made the charge shot your brother, and you want a warrant for his arrest?"

"I do," said Bud, quietly.

The judge looked at Bud for a long time in silence, seeming to take him all in at a glance. Then he removed the cigar from his mouth.

"You're an out-and-out cowboy," he said; "you'll get this warrant from me, and then you'll go after this man and shoot him up with a gun so that there won't be any trial or any execution or anything. I know how you Westerners take the law into your own hands."

"I'd like to do that," said Bud, "but I won't do it."

"How do I know you won't do it?" said the judge. "You'll get the warrant, and when you get out of my

sight and see the fellow you want to serve the warrant on you'll forget what the warrant's for. You'll think that it's a warrant to kill him. I know your type of man. I don't doubt that you're in the right, too, and I can't say that I blame you much."

"Look here," said Ted, "I came here to vouch for this man. I ought to be pretty well known in this vicinity, for I own half the Las Animas Ranch, and if you inquire of Mr. George Miller he'll give me a pretty fair character. My name is Ted Strong."

"And you are Ted Strong," said the judge, looking at the boy curiously; "I've heard of you. And you say that you are willing to vouch for this man?"

"I do," said Ted. "He's one of my men. He met this fellow, Speed, to-day and would have shot the fellow down, as he deserves, only for me. I persuaded him to let the law handle him. If you give us the war rant now, and let us get after him and serve it, he'll get what he deserves. If not, he'll get away, for he knows that Bud is in this part of the country, and he'll jump to Mexico in a day or so. If you want to teach this man any respect for the law you'll show that it can help those who are in the right. I'll see to it that no violence is done, and that Speed is arrested as peaceably as possible."

Judge Blake puffed at his cigar for a moment in silence. Then he spoke:

"You'll get the warrant," he said; "I'll call my clerk now and have it made out."

CHAPTER VII.

A NEW PLAY AT THE BLIND TIGER.

Jim Speed, all around cattleman and *segundo* at the Las Palomas Ranch, was spending his evening at the Blind Tiger, in Paco.

The Blind Tiger was a gambling saloon, such as can be found in any of the smaller Western towns in the cattle district. There are no city ordinances in towns like Paco to forbid gambling, and, as long as there are no shooting affrays in the places and no notorious robberies, the town marshals let them alone and allow their proprietors to go their ways unheeded.

The Blind Tiger might have served as a model for any number of like resorts throughout the Southwest. It was a neatly enough furnished place, with a bar and cigar counter at the end nearest the door. At this counter you could purchase a drink of execrable whisky, made of potato alcohol and flavored with prune juice, for two bits or a quarter. At the cigar counter you could purchase a torpedo-shaped weed, made of Connecticut tobacco with a fine gold band around it, and with a flavor that would make a horse choke, for another quarter.

If you take one of these drinks of whisky—the bartender in the Blind Tiger does not allow you to see the bottle, but measures you out your drink so that you do not get more than your quarter's worth—and then smoke one of the cigars, you will be in a state of mind fit for anything. The crude spirit, of which the whisky contains at least fifty per cent., will have set your heart beating at a tumultuous rate—and made you uncomfortably hot and excitable, and the cigar will have stupefied your brain and deadened your nerves so that you are in a general daze.

You are then in a fit state of mind to turn your attention to the various gambling games into which you may enter if you feel so disposed.

You will find a faro layout there—a board painted with representations of high cards and a box beside it, out of which the dealer deals cards, one by one, and turns them upward so that everything is open and aboveboard. You place your money on one of the painted cards on the board, and, if the dealer turns up the card, you win, if not, you lose. Or you may "copper" a certain card—that is, play it to lose instead

of to win. In this case the previous order of things is reversed. Next to the table, where the faro is dealt, you will find a roulette wheel, and after watching the play there for a short time, that is, provided the drink and the cigar has not dulled your mind beyond all rational thought, you will go away from it without risking anything. Of all the games of chance played in gambling houses perhaps faro is the fairest and the one which gives you the best chance of winning something once in a while. There is no doubt at all about the roulette. In that game the chances are twenty to one in favor of the house at the very least. Further on you will find a gang of vaqueros, stumpy, greasy-looking fellows, dressed in the gaudiest and most tinselly clothes imaginable, playing monte—the Mexican game.

If you are not a Mexican or an old-time Texan, you won't understand this game, and you will pass further on to find a number of men at another table engaged in a game of poker.

It was at this table that Jim Speed sat. Speed was a crack-a-jack poker player. He had the nerve to bluff well, as he had shown that afternoon when he was confronted by Bud Morgan, and he had played the game in all sorts of places, all the way from Abilene up in Kansas down to Matamoras in old Mexico. He knew all the chances there are in drawing to two cards or three cards, and he knew how to keep his face calm and impassive no matter what cards he drew. His belt, containing a revolver and a gleaming row of cartridges, was lying on the table beside him. A half-emptied whisky glass was at his other hand, and, tilted up at an acute angle in his mouth, and half obscured by his long, fair mustache, was the reeking butt of a bad cigar. Several beads of perspiration stood out on his bronzed forehead, and his sombrero was pushed back showing a close-cropped bullet head underneath, looking strangely white in contrast with the deep tan of his face. His cold, blue eyes were half closed as he peered through the wreaths of smoke at his cards and then at the others who sat at table with him.

They were a strange crowd. One was a red-nosed fellow with a white, woollike mustache and goatee and a black, frock coat and hat.

He rejoiced in the title of colonel, and there was a legend to the effect that in the dim past he had inhabited the town of Louisville, Kentucky. It was his wont, when half seas over, to boast of the beauty of the women and the speed of the trotting horses in Louisville, and, perhaps, this gave rise to the legend as to his origin.

Beside him sat a half-breed Indian, a sickly, yellow-brown in color, with one gray eye and another black. His hair was parted in the middle and plastered down low over his forehead on either side. It was as black as the raven's wing and as glossy as the coat of a thoroughbred horse.

The two others at the table were Mexicans, short, thickset and bow-legged, with dirty velvet jackets and gorgeous red *bandas* wound about their waists.

Jim Speed was playing in great luck. The Mexicans had put up their last three-month's salary. They had already lost the greater part of it, and now, when the cards were dealt, Jim Speed drew one. The colonel drew two, and the Mexicans drew three each. The half-breed signified by a grin that he was out of it and threw his cards on the table.

The colonel put up a goodly stack of red chips, and one Mexican doubled it. The other raised it three chips, and Jim Speed doubled that.

"I'm out, sah," said the colonel; "it is not often, sah, that a Faihfax drops out, but I must quit now, sah; I have an appointment to keep; I hope you will excuse me, sah."

"Certainly," said Speed, after glancing at the table and seeing that the colonel's stack of chips was exhausted. The colonel's appointment seemed to be with the bartender, for he immediately betook himself in the direction of that individual.

The Mexicans raised Speed, and he glanced at them impatiently.

"I ought to be out of here," he muttered; "I planned to leave this town before this. I've got enough money to cut a fine dash now, but I'll trim these fellows before I go. That fellow, Morgan, can't get after me till to-morrow, anyway. I'll trim these fellows and get

out with a good haul. I'm sick of this steady life on a ranch, anyway."

He raised the Mexican's two chips. He was confident that he had them both beaten, but he would encourage them to put up all they had if he could. They both worked for him on the Las Palomas Range, and he knew what they had in their possession to a cent. If he had made a big raise the Mexicans might have become frightened and dropped out; that was why he raised them only two chips.

One of the Mexicans dropped out as it was. The other raised Speed five chips more. Speed raised him again, and it went on this way until the vaquero had put up every cent in his possession.

He threw down his cards with an exclamation of triumph and showed a full house. A slow smile came over Speed's face. He showed his own hand. He held four treys. He had the Mexican beaten.

The vaquero leaned back in his chair.

"*Madre di Dios!*" he exclaimed. "The saints are against me! I have lost."

A slow smile appeared on Speed's face.

"Too bad," he said; "I reckon yer about cleaned out, too. But we have to go by the cards."

"I have lost everything," said the vaquero. "I meant to buy a necklace for da girl, la bella Rosie. Now she will have none."

"Can't be helped," said Speed.

He reached out his hand and began to rake in the chips.

"I guess I'll cash in and skip out of here," he said; "I'm going to leave Paco to-night. I've got a good horse hitched up outside. I've been staying here too long as it is."

He rose to his feet and cast away his cigar as he began to arrange his chips in stacks before him.

At this moment the door of the Blind Tiger flew open and a man entered. He had long, yellow hair and steady blue eyes. His face was as pale as death, and he seemed to notice nothing about him. Those in the room saw something peculiar in his manner. Behind him came a fellow clad in a khaki riding suit, with brown eyes and a handsome tanned face.

The yellow-haired stranger moved straight across the room, his eyes fixed on Jim Speed. Some of the people in the room had seen men look that way before. They knew what it meant, and they cleared a lane in front of Bud Morgan.

"Look out, Jim," yelled one man to Speed, who was still bending over the table arranging his chips.

Speed looked up suddenly and then started back.

His hand shot out for his belt of arms, but at the same time Bud Morgan leveled a revolver at his head.

"Jim Speed, you're my prisoner!" he said.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIGHT AT THE BLIND TIGER.

Speed was taken by surprise at the sudden appearance of the two people he most feared, but the coolness and wariness of the man was shown in his next action. He saw that there was no chance of reaching the belt of arms, so, like a flash, he dropped on all fours behind the table.

Even as he dropped, his hand shot out and a knife went hurtling through the air straight at Bud's head. Bud ducked and it spun over his head and impaled itself in the rough board wall at the other end of the place.

"Steady there, Bud," said Ted; "we are to take this man prisoner. Remember the promise I made for you."

"I remember," said Bud, slowly advancing toward the table behind which Speed was crouching.

The colonel, who had been hanging over the bar, stepped forward now.

"By Jove, sah," he said, "Mistah Speed is a friend of mine. He is weaponless. I will not see him attacked this way."

Ted faced him.

"If you've got any sense at all," said the young rough rider, "you won't butt in where you don't belong and in a business that you don't understand. If any of your friends are here they ought to take you home and put you to bed. This man has a warrant for

Speed's arrest, and I'm going to see that he arrests him without any interference."

Ted saw that the colonel was drunk, so he did not think it worth while drawing his revolver. The colonel, however, no matter how drunk he was, was not a man to back down. He had whipped out a little derringer in an instant and pointed it at Ted.

Before he knew what had happend the young rough rider had twisted it out of his hand and sent him reeling back. He fell over a chair and lay there whining with his heels sticking up in the air.

But Speed had other friends in the place.

One of the Mexicans leaped at Bud Morgan from the side, and almost succeeded in knocking the revolver from his hands.

Ted heard the scuffle. He wheeled like a flash and sailed into the fight. His fist landed on the vaquero behind the ear and sent him in a heap on the floor. Speed, however, had noticed the diversion in his favor.

He now made a wild leap for the door. Bud grabbed for him but was knocked aside, and Speed went rushing past.

Ted was behind Bud. He had just knocked down one Mexican, and was preparing to strike another when he saw Speed rushing toward him. There was no time to draw a weapon, for in another minute the man would have escaped out into the night. Ted dropped low and tackled the cattleman as a football player makes a tackle. Both rolled over on the floor, but Speed was uppermost.

Jim Speed kept his wits about him wonderfully. Before Ted could get up he had half arisen. He had no idea of staying to fight. His only thought was of escape, and every energy was bent toward that. With a wild scramble he tore himself free from Ted's arms, scrambled to his feet and dashed for the door.

Bud Morgan was after him like a sleuthhound, and Ted leaped up a moment later and followed the pair out.

The darkness outside seemed doubly thick after the bright lights of the gambling saloon, and the three dashed out of it like madmen.

Behind them came a hooting, shouting crowd anxious to see how the whole thing would end.

In the struggle, Bud's revolver had fallen to the floor, but he ran after Speed, thinking of nothing but of getting his hands on him. Speed grabbed the first horse he saw, which happened to be Bud's, and was off, flying through the darkness like a specter. Bud got on Speed's horse, and Ted mounted his own and the three clattered up the street of Paco at a breakneck pace.

"Pull up there or I'll shoot!" yelled Ted. "We have a warrant for you."

Speed's only answer was to spur on at a quicker pace. The moon was setting now, and it was hard to pierce the darkness. Up through Paco sped the trio and out to the prairie beyond.

Ted and Bud rode neck and neck, neither speaking, but both gazing intently ahead at the black form they saw flying before them.

Ted's pistol came out and was leveled between the ears of his horse.

Three times it flashed and three times its leaden messenger sang past Speed's ears.

Again Ted fired, and this time he heart a snort of pain from the horse of the man he was pursuing.

"Faster!" said Bud; "his horse is wounded."

With spur and quirt the two urged their horses along.

Speed cast back a despairing glance. He felt his own horse weakening. It had been hit on the haunch. He urged it forward all he knew how, but the hoofbeats sounded louder and louder now, and the black forms pursuing him grew larger and larger through the darkness.

He wished that he had remembered, or had time, to pick up his belt of arms as he dashed out, but such wishes were vain now.

His face went pale, and great beads of sweat stood out at his forehead.

He remembered the one glimpse he had of Bud when he entered the gambling saloon, and he felt that Bud's eyes were burning upon him out of the darkness now.

Nearer and nearer swung the forms of the two rough riders.

Then a lariat came coiling through the air. It came with a gentle swish, and Speed did not see it or hear it till too late. It settled about his throat, and he uttered a choking cry as he tried to cast it off.

But he was not quick enough.

Bud had thrown the lariat, and now he checked his horse. Speed was jerked back out of his saddle and cast in a heap on the ground.

Ted could not bring his horse up quick enough and thundered past him.

When he came back Bud was dismounted and standing beside the man he had captured.

"Want any help?" he asked.

"No," said Bud, with a sort of bitter laugh; "I could fight ten like him single-handed."

Then Ted could see that already Speed's hands were bound fast behind his back, and that he was standing in the roadway.

"Keep him there," said Ted. "I'll catch his horse and we'll take him back on it."

Ten minutes later Jim Speed was bound hard and fast to the saddle of Bud Morgan's wounded horse. He spoke never a word, but as his eyes rested on Bud Morgan they took on a despairing, terrified look that no one had ever seen in them before. Jim Speed felt that his Nemesis had overtaken him at last, just when he had expected to leave Texas with a fortune, and that his day of reckoning had come when he least expected it. As for Bud, he neither looked nor glanced at his prisoner, and it was a silent trio that rode back toward the jail at Paco.

CHAPTER IX.

AN INVITATION TO LAS PALOMAS.

'Hello, Teddie, how you vas?"

Ted was seated in his room at the Las Animas Ranch the morning after the arrest of Jim Speed, when Carl Schwartz ambled in with this salutation.

"I'm all right," said Ted; "how are you?"

"I haf a message vor you, Teddie," said Carl, solemnly. "A chent who vos mounted on a horse drotted into der ranch in chust now alretty unt left it. Here id iss."

Carl waved a delicate-looking envelope in the air.

"That looks as if it came from a lady," said Kit Summers, who, with Bud Morgan, had sauntered into the room in the wake of Carl Schwartz.

"Der man who brought it iss waiting vor his answer," said Carl; "he is outside sitting der pack oof his horse upon."

Ted peeped out the window and saw seated on horse back in front of the ranch a gayly accoutred vaquero.

He looked at the envelope.

It was addressed in dainty feminine writing to "Ted Strong, Las Animas Ranch, Dimmit County, Texas."

He held it to his nose and sniffed.

"Perfumed," he said; "one does not often see perfumed paper in this part of Texas. It is surely from a lady."

The other boys gathered around while Ted opened the envelope and spread out the sheet of note paper that it contained.

The letter ran as follows:

"Mr. Theodore Strong.

"Dear Sir: For some time we have been fellow ranchers in this part of Texas, our ranges lying almost side by side. I have heard a great deal about you and am anxious to meet you. Being a lady, it would scarcely be the thing for me to make the first call upon you, but I think that if we could meet personally and talk over matters together we might come to a more satisfactory understanding in regard to some disputes which have occurred between your men and mine. Our interests as ranch owners are common to a certain extent, and I should appreciate very much your advice in regard to certain matters connected with running my ranch. Besides that, I must admit that I have a woman's curiosity to see a gentleman of whom I have heard so much and so favorably. Could you ride over by yourself this afternoon and have lunch at the Las Palomas Ranch? I hope you will be able to do this. I do not ask any of your friends for the reason that I have few servants at the ranch house at present, and that I would not be able to entertain many suitably. I

hope to see you, however, this afternoon, and, later on, I may have the pleasure of meeting some of your friends. My messenger, who brings this letter to you, will await your answer. Any of the Mexicans in the vicinity can direct you how to ride to get to the Las Palomas Ranch house. I wish to thank you in person for the rescue of my cousin, Miss Rossiter, when you saved her from the fire in which my other ranch house was destroyed.

"Yours sincerely,
"MARCELLA ORSIMO,
"Las Palomas Ranch."

Ted read this note through twice before he spoke.

"By jove, this is a surprise!" was his exclamation, when he finally handed it over to the other boys for their perusal.

"You've made a hit with this lady and no mistake," said Kit Summers, "and you haven't even seen her. I tell you, boys, it takes little Teddie to win out with the ladies."

"Nonsense," said Ted, "it isn't anything like that. It's either a sign that she's beaten in her fight for the Golden Mesa, or——"

"Or what?" asked Kit.

"I don't know," said Ted; "I can't quite understand it."

"I guess it's about that," said Bud Morgan. "Maybe she wants to make you an offer to take charge of her ranch. She's lost her foreman now. Jim Speed will never ride a range again. He's locked up safe and sound now, and by the time we can send for the witnesses from Kansas he'll be put on trial. And there's no chance of his getting away, either. She must have heard of his arrest by this time, and she doesn't know what to do, in all likelihood. Jumpin' sandhills! she cain't run a ranch by herself without some white man ter take charge of it fer her. Them there vaqueros is no good fer nothin' but ropin' cattle an' ridin' ther range. They'd rob her right an' left, an', like as not, that scoundrel, Speed, hes been a doin' it, an' she's just a-gettin' wise to it. She wants ter consult yer, [illegible] about runnin' ther ranch. There ain't no other white man she can ask around these here diggin's."

"There's her son, Alfred Orsimo," said Ted.

"Shucks!" said Bud. "Thet feller don't know nothin'. He's been brought up tied ter his mother's apron strings, an', he ain't no use but ter ride a hoss an' look pretty. He's all right at that, though. He come to yore assistance when he saw ye was bein' unjustly treated an' liable ter get inter trouble fer somethin' yer didn't do."

"He has a lot of good in him," said Ted. "I've heard, however, that he went East a short time ago."*

"Are you going to go, Teddy?" asked Carl.

"I'd go if I were you," said Kit; "then you can come back and tell us all about it."

"Let's see this messenger who brought the letter," said Ted.

Bud Morgan went to the window and beckoned for the vaquero, who had brought the missive, to come inside. The fellow leaped jauntily from the back of his pony and came clanking into the room, holding his hat in his hand and smiling blandly underneath his black mustachios.

"You brought this from the Señora Orsimo?" said Ted, addressing him.

"Ef it please you señor," said the vaquero, with a bow.

"And you are waiting my reply?"

The Mexican bowed again.

"What time does the señora expect me?"

"About one, ef it please you," said the vaquero.

Ted called Kit to one side and whispered in his ear. At first Kit looked surprised and stared, then he listened attentively and nodded his head several times.

In the meantime, the vaquero stood to one side, hat in hand, out of earshot and waiting patiently.

"You want my answer now," said Ted, "so you can ride back at once. Well, you can tell the señora that I am very grateful for her kind invitation, and that I shall be most happy to accept it. If you go downstairs you will find that the vaqueros there will have something for you to drink to refresh you on your ride back."

* See No. 17 of the YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS WEEKLY.

"Thanks, señor," said the Mexican, and, with another bow, he left the room.

"Now," said Ted, "I must brush up a bit. I'm going to meet this mysterious lady of whom we have heard so much."

CHAPTER X.

THE SENORA ORSIMO.

When Ted rode up to the Las Palomas Ranch, he saw a long, white building, baked in the hot sun and apparently deserted. A short time ago one of the ranch buildings, in which the señora had held her headquarters, had been burned down. The present ranch house was nothing but an old and lonely ruin then, but it had been rebuilt and furnished in a short space of time, and now it looked to Ted as if it had stood there for years.

Ted gazed around him, right and left, looking for a vaquero to take his horse. Then he slipped from the saddle and stood for a moment before the door of the ranch house, hesitating as to what to do. As he stood there, two Mexicans appeared from a building at the side. Ted relinquished his bridle rein to one of them, and the other, bowing low, led the way up the stone steps to the broad porch of the ranch house. He held open the door for Ted to enter, and Ted found himself in a cool, dark interior, refreshingly cool after the heat outside, and so dark that he could not see at all for a few moments.

"This way, señor," said the Mexican, and he led the way up a long flight of stairs. Ted stumbled after him, not being able to see very well yet. Up a long flight of broad stairs, carpeted down the middle with some heavy matted fabric, he followed his guide. On the walls, on all sides of him, he saw, through the cool twilight, antique armor and weapons, antlers and great Mexican saddles, the heads of antelopes and deer that had been killed and stuffed in the past, and long Spanish rifles of costly workmanship strung across them.

At one moment, he started back in amazement with an angry buzzing sounding in his ears. He looked above his head and saw that his shoulder had struck against a bunch of dried rattles from rattlesnakes. They had sent forth the fierce war rattle as clearly and distinctly as their owners had sounded it when alive. In spite of himself, Ted felt the cold shivers running down his back.

The Mexican laughed softly.

"The señor was startled," he muttered. Then he led the way again. At the head of the flight of stairs they came to a great oaken door, studded with iron bolts, and strengthened with antique brazen bars across it. The Mexican pushed against it, and it swayed softly open.

"It is here that the señora awaits you," he said.

Ted hesitated for a moment in spite of himself. The house was so dark and so cold, the atmosphere so uncanny, the noise of those dead rattles was still sounding in his ears. Then he laughed at his hesitation and stepped boldly inside.

He heard the door swing softly to behind him and turned sharply. Even as he turned, a bolt clicked in the door. Ted tried it. It was locked.

This looked funny, but Ted had gone too far now to draw back. He wheeled about again and advanced down the long room in which he found himself.

This room was unlike the rest of the house. It was carpeted with soft Persian rugs, hangings and draperies of rare and beautiful tints hung on the walls, and tables and bric a-brac of all descriptions were scattered about. There was a great bookcase lining one wall, and Ted's eyes were riveted to it at once. He saw that there was a splendid library there, and he would have asked nothing better than to have spent the afternoon poring over those books. Unlike the passage he had come through, this room was not dark. There were a number of windows placed high along the wall, and through them the bright sunlight filtered through softly-colored hangings. The whole air seemed saturated with some soft and delicate perfume, something like the scent of the huisache or catclaw blossoms in the spring. The floor, where it was not

covered with rugs, showed a polished inlay of hard and polished woods that must have cost a great deal to make.

At the other end of the room, leaning back in a big chair and reading idly at a book, sat a woman. She arose when Ted entered, and the young rough rider had a good view of her as she advanced down the room. This, then, was the Señora Orsimo of whom he had heard so much! There was no question as to the fact that she was beautiful. She was taller and stouter than either Louise or Daisy, and was, of course, more mature, but she had preserved her youth wonderfully, Ted thought, for a woman who had a son almost as old as he was himself.

Her hair was black, and her eyes were a dark-brown. Her face was regular, lineless and well rounded; her mouth, red as coral, was a perfect Cupid's bow, and she was dressed in a black velvet gown that swept the floor behind her as she walked.

When she came within a few paces of Ted she looked at him. Ted stood still with his hat in his hand, waiting for her to speak.

Then, to his surprise, she burst into a peal of silvery laughter.

"Why," she said, "you are not the person I expected to see! There must be some mistake."

"I think not, madam," said Ted, quietly. "I received your invitation and I came in answer to it."

The señora laughed again.

"I sent for Ted Strong," she said, "the captain of the young rough riders."

"That's my name," said Ted.

"You cannot be Ted Strong," said the woman, her mouth hardening and her eyes gleaming dangerously. Again she laughed, but, underneath that laugh, Ted now saw something cruel and threatening. Her eyes had a strange gleam in them that might have frightened some people, and Ted, looking at her shrewdly, saw that she, in spite of her beauty and rich surroundings, must have passed through some severe strain on her nerves recently; that she was high strung, and that she was in a condition closely approaching temporary insanity.

"You can't be the man I mean," she said, in a deep, vibrant contralto; "the man I am thinking of is great and powerful. He came down here and became my enemy. He fought me out of the mesa, which is mine by right. His brains and his strength proved greater than all the force of cowboys or vaqueros I could bring against him. He was not content with this. He hurt me in my affections. He came between me and those I loved. My cousin was here, Louise Rossiter, perhaps the only woman friend I shall ever have. He rescued her from fire and saved her life. Then he turned her against me. I still had my son. He met my son and disfigured him for life, dragging him in the dust and humiliating him. Did my son seek revenge and join me in my struggle against this monster! No! By some force of his, this man, this Ted Strong, controlled him and brought him over to his side and against me. I would have put this Ted Strong in prison, but my son, who has received such injuries from him, came between us and saved him from my anger. He was not contented with estranging me from my son. He went still further. He blocked me from the mesa, which was mine by right, by tearing down a whole hillside and changing the very face of nature herself to serve his purpose. He took the only man I could put trust in to attend to my business, the only manager I had for the ranch, and threw him in prison. This man, Speed, was determined and brave. He never could have been taken except by a man of giant strength and power. And then you come here and tell me that you are this Ted Strong!" Again the half-crazed woman broke off into a peal of laughter. "Why, you are nothing but a boy! I send for Ted Strong and they send me this stripling with smooth, rosy cheeks and a boy's fresh face, when I expected to see a battle-scarred veteran. Why, it is ridiculous! You are nothing but a

child. You are scarcely taller than I am myself. And you come and tell me that you are this Ted Strong who has accomplished all this, and expect me to believe you. It is an insult to my intelligence. I hoped to meet with a man of years and might. This is a joke you have played upon me."

The laughter of the woman rang wildly through the vaulted room. Ted gazed at her with steady, brown eyes.

"I see," he said, "that you have called me here, not to meet me nor to have lunch with me, but to make fun of me. You are not prepared to meet me now. I have come at the wrong time, perhaps. If you will excuse me, I will go out and ride back to the Las Animas Ranch and wait until you are more prepared to receive me."

"You think that you can leave me? That you are free to go and come as you choose? Try that door behind you."

"I know that the door is locked," said Ted; "I heard the click of the bolt in the lock as I came in. Will you not call your servants and ask them to unlock it for me, and allow me to go free?"

Señora Orsimo sank into a chair, and contemplated Ted with an amused smile on her face.

"You want me to let you go free now that I have you safe here?"

"I came on your invitation. It would be a dishonorable thing for you to detain me here against my will," said Ted, calmly, his eyes never wavering a fraction of an inch, although the eyes of the woman were fixed on them in a steady gaze.

"Honor!" the señora laughed. "What do I care whether it is dishonorable or not? You are young. You have yet to learn that when a woman is desperate she will stop at nothing. When everything in the world has been taken away from me by you, you want me to allow you to escape from my clutches, and continue to goad me and harass me?"

"I've neither goaded nor harassed you," said Ted. "I have simply tried to get for the owners of the Las Animas Ranch what they were entitled to. I had no wish to injure your son. It was his own horse that dragged him through the dust, and I did my best to save him. As for your man, Speed, he is guilty of the crime of murder, and he will answer for it. I had no personal feeling against you, no wish to work you harm in any way. You say you are surprised to see me so young. You were curious to see what I looked like. Now you have seen me, let me go."

"You talk well, but you are afraid," said the woman. "You know that I have you in my power. You are far away from your followers now. They cannot help you. The only people in this house are three Mexicans. At a word from me they would kill you."

"What do you intend to do with me?" asked Ted, coolly.

"What do I intend to do? I don't know all that I will do. I know first that I will hold you here as my prisoner. I may kill you, I may send you miles away into Mexico. Ha! You are afraid now!"

"Not in the least afraid, madam,' said Ted; "you can't frighten me by these threats."

"They are no threats. Do you think that when I have my foe in my power I will let him go? I will shut up all your strength and all your might in a little cell. It cannot harm me then."

Ted Strong looked at her for a moment in silence. Then he tilted back his head and laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" asked the woman, sharply. "Have you gone crazy?"

"I am laughing at your mistake," said Ted; "you think that you have all my strength and all my power locked up here in this room. I tell you, madam, were all my strength here, it could not be locked up in a little cell. It would fill this room."

Señora Orsimo stared at him.

"You are talking in riddles," she said. "I cannot understand you."

"I'll give you the explanation of the riddle now," said Ted, "then you'll understand."

Suddenly the young rough rider placed a tiny whistle to his lips and blew upon it one piercing blast. At the sound of that shrill whistle the whole sleepy ranch house seemed to suddenly awake. There was the clang of arms, the shouting of men's voices, shrill cries, and the rush of hurying feet along the corridors. It seemed as if at that signal a thousand hidden forms had leaped into life and action.

Señora Orsimo started to her feet in surprise. Even as she did so, the sound of shattering blows came from the oaken door at the end of the room. Crash! crash! louder and louder, then splinters of the solid oak began to fly in, then the door crashed inward, and over it poured the young rough riders!

Ben Tremont was in the lead, looking like a giant in his ponderous strength, and carrying a great sledge hammer in one brawny hand.

Behind him came Kit Summers, revolver in hand, his dark eyes flashing, and behind him came Bud Morgan, his yellow hair streaming out behind him.

After them came all the others. They rushed across the great room to where Ted stood, and, as if at a given signal, ranged themselves behind him.

The señora stared at them, struck dumb with surprise, one hand clutching at the bosom of her black velvet gown, her eyes wide open, and her face as pale as death.

"You say that I talk in riddles," said Ted; "you were surprised that one so young as I had beaten you. You asked me where my strength and power came from."

Ted pointed at the young rough riders ranged behind him.

"There's my strength!" he said, in ringing tones. "There's my power! There's my might! There's what has beaten you in all the fights you have made against us. It is not one man that wins in the long run, it is a union of men. You were fighting, not me, but the young rough riders. Do you understand now?"

For a moment Señora Orsimo stood upright and stock-still. Her eyes gleamed so strangely that those who saw her feared that her reason had left her. Then a change came over her face. She drew a deep, half-sobbing breath.

"I understand," she said, in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper; "you have conquered me."

"I accepted your invitation here, fearing that you planned some treachery," said Ted, in a cold, stern voice. "The young rough riders followed me here. They came in time. Your plans to capture me have failed."

"Failed!" The señora repeated the word after Ted. "Yes; I have failed in everything."

She fell in a faint, and Ted caught her in his arms.

"Call some of those Mexicans you scared off, Kit," he said, "they will bring her to. Then we will leave quietly. I think she has learned a lesson."

THE END.

Next Week's Issue (No. 19) Will Contain

TED STRONG IN THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN;

OR,

Bud Morgan's Vengeance.

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